

“Three Lessons from the Stolen Shofar”

Rosh Hashana 5783 - Rabbi Nissan Antine

Imagine the following scenario. (What I am about to say is completely hypothetical and I would never think that OUR shofar blowers would do such a thing!) Let's assume that our shofar blower... (kindly insert the name of whichever of our shofar blowers would make the scenario the most humorous for you!), couldn't find his shofar on Erev Rosh Hashana. He runs to the Jewish bookstore an hour before it closes and, thank G-d, they have a shofar! But he reaches into his pocket and unfortunately, he forgot his wallet. Oy! (Now, again, remember this is NOT real. Just Hypothetical!). So our shofar blower takes the shofar, puts it in his backpack when nobody's looking, and walks out of the store with a stolen shofar! Now imagine that our shofar blower used that stolen shofar for all 100 blasts. Would (again in this very HYPOTHETICAL situation!) we have fulfilled our Mitzvah?

Now for comparison's sake, the Halacha is very clear that if someone steals Matzah (I was about to say who would steal Matzah, but with Matzah prices these days, you never know!), and eats it at the Seder, they do not fulfill their obligation (it is considered a מצוה מבטלה - הבהא בעבירה - a mitzvah which comes about through a sin). And if one would steal a Lulav and Etrog they likewise would not fulfill their obligation. So what is the Halacha of the stolen shofar? It should seem obvious that if our shofar blower stole a shofar and blew for us, we would not fulfill our obligation.

Yet, the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 586:2) rules:

הגזול שופר ותקע בו יצא

If one steals a shofar and blows with it, **he has fulfilled his obligation**

The Mishna Berura is troubled. How is this different from the stolen Matzah or the stolen Lulav? The Mishna Berura explains (I am paraphrasing) that the Mitzva of shofar is not the blast. Rather the mitzvah is to listen to the sound (קול) of the shofar. (After all, the Bracha that we make is not על תקיעת שופר but לשמוע קול שופר). And by the time the sound reaches my ear, it is detached from the stolen shofar! A sound cannot be stolen!

Of course, the Mishna Berura clarifies that this is terrible behavior and if one blows with a stolen shofar, they shouldn't make a bracha! But if our shofar blower did, in fact, blow with a stolen shofar, the Halacha is that we have all fulfilled our Mitzvah!

All of this points to the following insight. What is THE Mitzvah of today? It is an act of Listening. So what are we supposed to be listening for when we hear the Shofar? What *Kolot* (sounds) should we hear?

I think if we look at two of the Biblical Heroes highlighted on Rosh Hoshana, we can begin to unpack some of the *Kolot* (sounds) that we are supposed to hear.

Let us begin with Sarah. Sarah was remembered on Rosh Hashana. After so many years of struggle and pain with infertility, on her 90th Rosh Hashana, Sarah conceived and eventually gave birth to Yitzchak. Yitzchak is circumcised on his 8th day and Sarah says at the post bris speech (I assume when she was explaining to the crowd the meaning of the name, as we do today!)

צחק עשה לי אלהים כליה שמע יצחק לי:

God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me

This is the first קול שמיעת (hearing of a sound) that we need to hear on Rosh Hashana. It is perhaps the easiest one (although sometimes can be accompanied by jealousy and some personal sadness). We hear the voice of those celebrating and do our best to celebrate together with them. We listen to the sound of grateful new parents. We listen to the *Kol Sasson, V'kol Simcha, Kol Chatan V'Kol Kallah*. Boruch Hashem, I am looking around this room and see multiple brides and grooms and their wonderful families who just celebrated a marriage this year. And I am also seeing all of you who participated and listened to their voices of joy and danced with them at their weddings! I am also thinking of the many members of our shul who had babies this year and how so many of us listened and celebrated with them! (As an aside, Beth Sholom has always had many new babies but as a suburban shul with a very diverse age demographic, I, as a rabbi, have typically officiated at more funerals than baby namings and bris ceremonies. But this past year, (we actually counted it up), due to our wonderful influx of young families, our numbers have changed. We now have more Babies born than funerals! כל השומע יצחק לי! All who hear these sounds of joy, will laugh with me! This is one kind of Kol that we hear in the sound of the Shofar!

The second Kol is the voice(less) Kol of Chanah. Chanah also struggled for many years with infertility. But her voice is the one of pain and struggle. As a Community, we must be present to hear those voices as well. But when you look carefully at the story of Chana (from day one Haftarah), something fascinating emerges. She has pain and nobody (particularly the men in her life) understands her. Eli (the High Priest) sees her prayer and he thinks that she is drunk. He is not listening to her, he is judging her. The text says, ועלי שומר את פיה (Eli was watching her mouth) and not שומע אל ליבה (listening to her heart). I imagine Eli watching her from a distance with his arms folded with a look of judgment. Instead of listening to her heart with compassion, he is watching her in

judgment. But the most interesting aspect of Chanah's *Kol* is that it is a voiceless *Kol*. Her pain is so great that she cannot even get the words out. שפתייה נעות וקולה לא ישמע - her lips were moving but her voice could not be heard. So this sound that we have to hear in the shofar is the one from those in our family and community that cannot even be articulated. The pain (and sometimes the shame and secrecy) is so great that it cannot even be articulated. And what is amazing about Chanah's voiceless prayer is that it becomes the model of our Silent Amidah. So when we are standing in communal prayer with our community, we are essentially affirming that we are hearing the voiceless prayers and challenges that cannot be said out loud. I hope we can hear this in the sound of the shofar and commit to being even better listeners in the coming year.

The final *Kol* that I hope we can hear in the shofar (and perhaps the most important on Rosh Hashana) is the *Kol* of Hashem that is put in our hearts.

ותן בלבנו בינה להבין ולהשכיל, לשמוע ללמוד וללמד, לשמור ולעשות ולקיים את כל דברי תלמוד תורתך באהבה."

We ask Hashem to please put understanding in our hearts. TO LISTEN. To learn and teach to follow all the words of the Torah with a sense of Love.

This is the voice inside of us which is inspired and animated by our Torah. It is the voice inside of us that tries to figure out what our *Tafkid Hachaim* (life's purpose is). Why are we here? What are my obligations (and opportunities!) as a parent, grandparent, sibling, spouse, friend, Jew and human? How am I doing with all these obligations? Do I hear these voices? How was I doing last year on Rosh Hashana when I heard the shofar? How am I doing now? Am I pleased with my progress? How can I do better this coming year? What are my goals for this coming year?

These questions call out to us through the sounds of the shofar. They are the existential questions of life. I hope and pray that we can really hear them.

I would like to conclude with a story that I think brings together all of these different kinds of listening. The story is about someone who almost became the third Lubavitcher Rebbe. (Many of you know that I have deep Chabad Roots. I often joke with Rabbi Bluming that while he might be the only Chabad Rabbi on Seven Locks, I actually have better Lubavitch Yichus!).

The story is as follows. After the Baal Hatanya (first Lubavitch Rebbe) died, he was succeeded by his son, The Rebbe Rav Dov Ber, commonly known as the Mittlerer Rebbe. When Rav Dov Ber died, Lubavitch had its first major debate over who would be the next Rebbe. One possible candidate was Rav Dov Ber's brother (son of the Baal Hatanya) Rav Chaim Avraham. The other candidate was Rav Menachem Mendel - The Tzemach Tzedek who was the Son in law of Rav Dov Ber and the nephew of Rav Chaim Avraham. (Since you probably know many chabadniks named Menachem Mendel and few named Chaim Avraham, you probably know who became Rebbe!). What was unique about this debate was that normally each candidate says that they are worthy to be the next Rebbe. In this case, Rav Chaim Avraham (the uncle) was saying that his nephew should be the next rebbe and the Tzemach Tzedek was saying that his uncle should be the next Rebbe! One day, Rav Chaim Avraham takes his followers on a walk. They arrive at the Tzemach Tzedek's house. The Tzemach Tzedek stands up for his uncle. Rav Chaim Avraham says, "I might be the uncle, I might be older. But you are the rebbe. So I stand for you." And the Tzemach Tzedek eventually accepted to be the Rebbe and Rav Chaim Avraham submitted to be his younger nephew's Chosid. Fast forward a number of years. Rav Chaim Avraham is very old. He can barely walk. He gets permission to have a minyan daven with him in his house because it's too difficult to walk even the one block to the main shul. One year on Rosh Hashana, Rav Chaim Avraham's private minyan finished early. They heard all 100 blasts of the shofar. And Rav Chaim Avraham asks for his cane. He starts walking to the main shul. I am sure you have seen very elderly people walk when it's difficult. Every step is so difficult. He has to stop and rest many times. It takes more than half an hour to walk about a block. He finally arrives and listens to the 100 shofar blasts of the Tzemach Tzedek.

After shul, everyone rushed up to him. "Why did you spend all that energy getting here? You already had 100 blasts in your private minyan. You already fulfilled your mitzvah"

Rav Chaim Avraham responds. The posuk doesn't say אשרי העם תוקעי תרועה - Blessed is the People who Blow the Teruah. The Mitzvah is not the blowing. It says אשרי העם יודעי תרועה - Blessed is the People who know the Teruah. Deep knowledge and awareness come from listening. Yes I might have fulfilled my mitzvah. But I still had more listening to do. More *Kolot* to hear. There are more sounds of laughter, and more sounds of pain (even unarticulated). And of course I had to hear the voice of Hashem inside of me pushing me to deeper Torah and Mitzvot."

Wow! To imagine, a holy and pious chosid like Rabbi Chaim Avraham (who was worthy to be the rebbe!) and was so old and it was so hard to walk. But he still needed to hear all those *Kolot* again in the shofar. I only pray that we can try to listen as deeply to our *Kol Shofar*.

Hashem should bless all of us with a year of Good Health, with a year of Blessing and Success. With a year of opening our hearts to listen to all the *Kolot* that we need to hear. And if we listen deeply, may Hashem listen to our tefilot and our deepest wishes!

Shana Tova!